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DOI: https://doi.org/10.1075/ip.00020.juc

Originally published at:
Jucker, Andreas H (2019). Internet pragmatics and the fuzziness of analytical categories: a response to Francisco Yus. Internet Pragmatics, 2(1):41-46.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1075/ip.00020.juc

Accepted manuscript: To appear in *Internet Pragmatics* 2.1, 41-46

Internet pragmatics and the fuzziness of analytical categories: A response to Francisco Yus.

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Introduction

Internet pragmatics, without any doubt, has established itself as an important subfield of pragmatics, and it is already mature enough to justify a look into the future and to try and predict future challenges and research issues. This is the aim of Yus' programmatic contribution to this special issue of the journal *Internet Pragmatics*, whose successful existence itself testifies to the reality of internet pragmatics as a research field. Like many other subfields of pragmatics (e.g. historical pragmatics or developmental pragmatics) the field constitutes itself through a delimitation of the object of investigation rather than through a delimitation of its research tools (as for instance corpus pragmatics or variational pragmatics). Such a definition of the field based on a specific choice of data necessarily begs the question whether it requires entirely new analytical tools, whether the existing tools can be adapted or whether they can even be employed in their original form. In fact, Yus does not take a very clear stance on this question. He starts out by outlining some research efforts that successfully use traditional pragmatic tools to the new internet reality, and then moves on to outline some of the challenges that present themselves as a consequence of the inherent properties of internet communication.

Ultimately, his predictions for the future are based, as they have to be, on a careful analysis of the current situation. The current properties of internet communication entail the necessity for the specific tools that are needed to investigate them. While it is easy to agree with many of the points that he raises in his article, I think he fails to sufficiently show how his observations combine into a larger picture. In this short reply to his article, therefore, I want to work out the commonalities between the various somewhat disjointed observations that he unfolds in his argumentation, and I suggest that these can be found in the increased fuzziness of traditional analytical categories. What used to be relatively clear-cut dichotomies have to be reconceptualised as fuzzy categories or sliding scales. In the following I can do no more than sketch out in a fairly cursory manner how the blurring of categories unites many of the points raised by Yus.

Blurring dichotomies

For a long time in the history of linguistics, spoken language and written language were seen as a clear-cut dichotomy, and until recently, pragmatics has given unequivocal preference to spoken language. This is no longer true. The dichotomy has given way to a much more diversified view of the modalities of communication including gestures, sign language and visuals such as still or moving pictures. The distinction between spoken and written has been blurred even more in the context of internet communication. Yus mentions the multimodal nature of mobile communication and gives pertinent examples of typed

messages that integrate visual elements, and he mentions the particularly interesting case of Facebook check-ins. This has to be seen in a larger context of communication modalities in which users communicate through a range of affordances that cannot easily be classified either as spoken or written. They click on icons to express their feelings, or on a combination of visual and verbal cues to tag locations, events or friends, they include selfies and other pictures or videos into their messages, they share or re-tweet messages from other users and so on.

A second dichotomy that has to be reconceptualised in the context of internet communication is the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous communication. Spoken communication, whether on the telephone or in a face-to-face situation, is taken to be synchronous, while written communication, for instance by letters or emails, is taken to be asynchronous because of the time-lag between the encoding and the decoding of the messages. In internet-based communication – or more generally in keyboard-to-screen communication (see Jucker and Dürscheid 2012) – a further category has been introduced, i.e. quasi-synchronous, to account for those situations in which two participants in a communicative exchange are simultaneously online but messages are exchanged only in their completed form and not incrementally while they are being produced (Jucker and Dürscheid 2012: 39). Jonsson (2015) conceptualises the same distinctions with the terms asynchronous, synchronous and supersynchronous. The last term refers to split-window ICQ chats, in which messages are transmitted stroke by stroke, allowing the recipient to receive them while they are being produced.

On a perhaps even more fundamental level, the realities of Internet communication also impair the usefulness of the dichotomy of utterance and text, where utterances are typically dialogic and spontaneously produced in a synchronous interaction, while texts are typically longer than utterances, more carefully planned, context free and monologic. Chat contributions, Facebook updates or Tweets all share elements of typical utterances and typical texts. They are realised in the graphic code, but they are often very spontaneous, highly contextual and exchanged in a quasi-synchronous fashion. This is why Jucker and Dürscheid (2012: 42) argue that the terms "utterance" and "text" should be given up altogether and replaced by the term "communicative act". This term encompasses larger as well as shorter units, and it includes non-verbal messages, such as Facebook likes, check-ins and taggings as well as sharing and re-tweeting of previous communicative acts. In general, it refers to "all forms of ostensive communication, that is to say communication that comes with a communicative intention" (Jucker and Dürscheid 2012: 42).

As a further dichotomy that can no longer be maintained as such, Yus mentions the opposition of online and offline. What was considered to be a clear distinction between the physical life of language users and their virtual realities in online contexts, such as computer games or virtual worlds, has turned into a much more complex conglomeration of levels (see also Rosenbaum et al. 2016). Twitch, as mentioned by Yus, is a particularly good example (see also the case study in Jucker et al. 2018). It is an interactive multimodal platform, in which video-game players stream their game play to a large and potentially global audience. The audience observes both a live webcam image of the game player and a live stream of what is going on within the video game. At the same time, the members of the audience listen to audio channels and they can interact with each other and the game player via chats. This creates a complex layering of contexts that renders the distinction between offline and online impractical. Pokémon GO, to add a slightly different example,

is an augmented reality mobile game. Players use mobile devices to locate, train, battle and capture creatures called Pokémon, and the game merges the physical world with an overlay of the game world including avatars and such features as PokéStops and PokéGyms.

Complex realities as they are created by Twitch or Pokémon GO require not only new terminologies to analyse the convergence of the online and offline, as Yus calls it, or more generally the different levels of reality. A systematic analysis of such complex forms of communication and interaction also requires innovative modes of data capture. In the case of Pokémon GO, for instance, a sophisticated combination of screen capture, video recording and head-movement tracking is required to capture all the relevant levels of what is going on. Such work has only just started, and it is not yet clear how the huge amount of data that is accumulated for even short sequences can be usefully aligned and made available for subsequent analysis (see Brandenberger and Meyer in prep).

And, finally, even one of the most basic distinctions in linguistics, the distinction between the speaker and the listener – or more generally between the production and the reception of language – has to be re-evaluated in the context of internet-based communication. Yus makes the point that recipients of internet content regularly have a much more active role in internet-based communication. They become co-participants and co-creators in the process of text production. This can be seen on social network sites in which postings by one person may evoke a large number of reactions in which the original poster together with many other people create a joint text. In the context of Wikipedia articles, the roles of author and reader becomes even more diluted, to use Yus' terminology. Every reader can turn into a writer and modify the text. In the process the text loses the fixity that has pertained to printed texts ever since Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. Texts no longer get fixed through their printing; they remain fluid and immediately modifiable (cf Jucker 2004). Even more complex forms of multi-layered participation frameworks can be observed in the context of new media platforms, such as YouTube, Twitter or Google Hangouts, which allow users to interact in a multiparty setting with groups of friends and strangers through a combination of written texts, audio- and video channels (see Rosenbaun et al. 2016b).

Conclusion

At present, the linguistic toolbox is not sufficiently equipped to deal with all the challenges that offer themselves as a result of the blurring of boundaries described above. In fact, mainstream linguistics seems to increasingly embrace corpus-linguistic tools. Such tools respond to the desire for empirically and statistically validated generalisations across vast amounts of linguistic data in the form of increasingly large corpora, but they are ill-suited to handle multimodal data and complex participation frameworks. Internet pragmatics requires more sophisticated tools to disentangle the multi-layered communicative complexities. As a crucial step in this endeavour, a new terminological framework needs to be established, a framework that takes account of fuzzy categories and sliding scales rather than clear-cut dichotomies. Recent handbooks (e.g. Herring et al 2013; Hoffmann and Bublitz 2017), dedicated journals, such as *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* or *Internet Pragmatics*, and, of course, programmatic articles like the one by Yus are leading the way.

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